

INTERVIEW WITH 0-10

Question:

...Mr. Robinson, that he make a check of his evidence, to see if he still believed that was accurate?

Prime Minister:

No, the point was raised in this way; in discussions Eric Robinson indicated it was the fact of the 'phone conversation and not the substance of it that had been related in my office on the 17th. Now one of the things that had puzzled me was how Eric Robinson could have a clear recollection of it, when I had none. If a Minister comes into me and says he has spoken with his permanent head, I am not going to regard that as remarkable, if he came and said he hadn't spoken with his permanent head for three months, I would regard that as remarkable. So the fact of the 'phone call in itself, was not remarkable and as it was put in that discussion, it gave me an explanation in my own mind, about Eric's recollection and my own complete lack of recollection. Now that was my interest in the matter and that was my only interest in the matter. It might have ended up in one other sentence or two other sentences in the statement I made in the Parliament explaining the very point I have just made - but could I make another point not really related to your question. I've had an extreme diffidence in talking about these matters. I do believe it is very important for conversations between Ministers and conversations in a Ministry, because part of this conversation was in a Ministry conversation, to be confidential. That is absolutely vital for the proper operating of Government and it's only because something has been blown up out of all proportion that was entirely and absolutely innocent in its nature and intent, that with Eric Robinson's agreement and after discussion with the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Anthony, it was determined that I ought to take this course.

Question:

You did suggest, though, to Mr. Robinson, at a Ministerial Meeting, according to your statement here, that he put pen to paper on the issue of his recollection. He did do that.

Prime Minister:

Not on the issue of his recollection, in relation to the matter that he'd just put to me. The Bulletin has made the suggestion that I was saying to him write me a note saying your recollection was hazy or inaccurate. Now, that suggestion is totally and absolutely false.

Question:

The distinction is you asked him merely to confirm his recollection as he best could at that stage?

Prime Minister:

Confirm what he had just put to me, but it was also put to him, before you do that, look at the evidence.

Question:

When this attached -- attached to your statement is a letter which he had proposed, he did put pen to paper. Now that says that he doesn't remember the detail of what Senator Withers did. Was that how it happened at that time?

Prime Minister:

That was how it was related at the time amongst Ministers.

Question:

Him saying that though. Is that any retraction from his evidence given before the Royal Commission?

Prime Minister:

Well, I think his evidence before the Royal Commission needs to be looked at in total.

Question:

And do you say, why then wasn't the letter sent, that he did pen?

Prime Minister:

Because that was Eric Robinson's decision and there was certainly no pressure from me that it ought to be sent. I hadn't seen it until today and quite deliberately, although I had earlier known of a draft existence, quite deliberately had not. Why he didn't send it was on advice and on re-reading the evidence. His evidence.

Question:

Would you agree though that is a softening of the position as the evidence originally came out which led to a lot of these stories?

Prime Minister:

I accept the position in the evidence as it is taken totally. The totality of his evidence.

Question:

And his recollection, according to this letter, that is wasn't clear in detail?

Prime Minister:

I'm sorry, I don't understand that...

Question:

According to his letter here, he says he doesn't really remember all the detail that Senator Withers did mention...

Prime Minister:

Part of his evidence also says that. But in answer to other questions put differently, there is a suggestion that some detail at least was made available in my office.

Question:

So it is entirely up to Mr. Robinson that he didn't then send on that letter?

Prime Minister:

Absolutely and completely.

Question:

Would that letter have helped your position?

Prime Minister:

No, it wouldn't have made any difference except it would have explained to me, to myself, why he had a clear recollection of it and why I had none. Because I mention it to you again, if a Minister comes into my office and says he has been speaking with his Permanent Head, that's not remarkable, it could only become remarkable because of the nature of the conversation or alternatively if he came in and said he wasn't on speaking terms with his Permanent Head. I would find that remarkable.

Question:

Have you any idea why Mr. Robinson wasn't prepared to say this in the House? Is he under the same sort of strictures of Ministerial meetings...?

Prime Minister:

The question of Ministerial confidentiality between, amongst, Ministers, that applies to all of us.

Question:

But this letter attached could be the only thing around that any newspaper, or bulletin or whatever it be, could get hold of at this stage.

Prime Minister:

I'm not aware of anything else being around. I think it would be very unlikely that they could have got hold of this either, for that matter. But, that's up to them.

Question:

Speculation about leadership challenges, taking to the enth degree some of the newspaper articles that have come. Have you considered that seriously?

Prime Minister:

No, not for one minute.

Question:

You didn't think it was ever on at all?

Prime Minister:

No

Question:

Is the issue closed now?

Prime Minister:

I've got no doubt that the Australian Labor Party will continue to try and press around in the peripheral matters in politics because they haven't mounted an argument against the Budget. They haven't mounted an argument against any of the mainstream policies of the Government. They know quite well that this Budget is being very well received in the business sector and very well received in financial markets overseas. They also know that that reception will be conducive to more and increased investment in Australia from Australian investors and from overseas investors and that's one of the things that will certainly assist in economic recovery and in the creation of jobs.

Question:

Can I put just one final point that the Opposition has made? They said that by your own admission on April 16th you say then that you knew about it, yet on the 23rd, one week later and I think about five weeks later again, terms for the Royal Commission were announced. It wasn't until May 26, some five weeks later that you actually included Senator Withers in it. Why was that?

Prime Minister:

On the 23rd of April the matters before us were the allegations against Eric Robinson. In addition to that, as I've made plain in the Parliament, there was evidence before us about how the name could have been changed relating to Senator Withers. The Attorney-General took quite specific action to make sure that that evidence would be available to the Royal Commission. Indeed, in relation to that part of it, the terms of reference were drawn in such a way that all the evidence could, would and did, come out---and it was only when matters began to unfold at a later point in evidence, Mr. Pearson had given evidence, Senator Withers had given evidence, that highlighted matters that had been said in the Senate on the 4th of November and consequently other debates in the Senate, all these matters came together and threw a greater importance on this particular matter and as a result of that, the terms of reference were widened in relation to a finding but there was no need to alter the terms of reference in relation to substance, to eliciting all the facts because the original terms of reference were adequate for that and the Attorney-General, in the name of the government, took very specific action to make sure that all the evidence would come out.